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FOR

NATIONAL PENITENCE;

OR, A

DISCOURSE

INTENDED FOR THE

APPROACHING FAST DAY.

J. Aikin

L O N D O N :

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A DISCOURSE, &c.

WHEN YE FAST, BE NOT AS THE HYPOCRITES.

Matt. vi. 16.

I SHOULD have been very far, my friends, from calling you together in this place on the present day, had I thought it likely to excite in any of your minds an opinion, that so insignificant a thing as abstaining from one meal, or adding one service to the religious exercises of the year, could produce any effect in changing the counsels of the Almighty. Such, I hope, was not the opinion of any of the enlightened persons who enjoined this public solemnity; since, to encourage a reliance on such means for obtaining any supposed point of national prosperity, or averting any apprehended calamity, would be to open an inlet for the most abject superstition, and the most unworthy ideas of the Divine Being. In vain would Prophets, Apostles, Reformers, and Wise Men of so many ages and countries have instructed mankind, were such attempts for replunging them into ignorance employed with success. In the confidence that your minds are elevated above such erroneous conceptions, I shall not take up your

time in proving, that all the good effects of this service are to proceed from its operation on *yourselves*.—But I shall, without further preface, lay before you those considerations which appear to me peculiarly suitable for such an occasion.

We are summoned on this day for the express purpose of humbling ourselves before our Maker for the *sins of the nation*; it is not therefore individual, but national faults, that are at present the proper subjects of our investigation. A nation, indeed, being composed of individuals, it may be said that it is the aggregate of their prevailing vices which forms the vicious character of the whole body. But the faults of particular men are various, according to the variety of causes that operate upon them; whereas the national faults are something more fixed and uniform, proceeding from causes of general operation, which cannot be removed without changes of circumstances equally extensive. Every man in some degree labours under their effects, though perhaps those effects may constitute but a small part of his sum of moral depravity: individuals may, therefore, be considerably amended in their private morals, while the public delinquency remains nearly the same. The case is like that of diseases of the body infesting peculiar situations. Men may enjoy a certain degree of general health, though not one of them is free from the country distemper; which is to be removed, not
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by remedies applied to individuals, but by alterations in the local causes which act upon them all. Let us then, divested as much as possible of prejudice, consider the moral state of our nation, and carefully examine what are the leading tendencies to evil resulting from our condition as a political body. We are solemnly called upon to do this; it cannot therefore be objected, that the time and place are improper for the purpose.

When we cast our eyes upon the later history of this island, we perceive a series of internal prosperity scarcely to be paralleled in the annals of any nation. In the midst of calamities that have shaken other countries to their very foundations—of wars that have involved almost the whole world in danger and distress—we have remained in a state of almost uninterrupted peace at home, gradually advancing in every thing that is thought to contribute to national greatness and felicity. The part we have taken in the hostilities that have ravaged the earth (and we have taken a very leading part) has been almost optional to us, arising rather from remote reasons of state-policy, than from any immediate necessity of self-defence; and if we have subjected ourselves to heavy burthens, we have found the ability to bear them. Happy in the quiet inheritance of a degree of political liberty, greater than has been transmitted to any other people, our struggles have been at end, while those of others

have been commencing, or are still to come. Security has produced industry, the spirit of adventure, and by their means a commerce bounded only by the limits of the globe. Wealth has flowed in upon us from all quarters, like the tides of the surrounding ocean; and it may be said, with more literal truth than was asserted of ancient Tyre, that "our merchants are princes."

But, from the earliest ages of the world, down through each successive period, it has been found, that a similar state of prosperity is productive of vices which tend to the destruction of their parent. In whatever light we consider these, whether as the natural consequences of things, or as proofs of a degeneracy in human nature, it is our business rather to detect and attempt to remedy them, than, while they still subsist, to deprecate the effects of the divine displeasure against them. A state of vice is a state of disease. If we are unable or unwilling to cure it, shall the Deity be moved by our entreaties to delay his remedial process? O, let us not add to our other faults the impiety of wishing to stay his hand when employed in working our highest good!

A great part of you are old enough to remember the various solemnizations of this kind, which the sovereign authority was pleased to direct, during the last unhappy war. With what earnestness did the public forms of prayer plead for

unconditional success in our arms! What bold assumptions of justice on our part—What bitter criminations of our revolted children! God thought not fit to answer our petitions, or to confirm our rash judgments. He established, by his strong right arm, an independent nation across the Atlantic, which he has ever since distinguished by his choicest favours, and which seems destined for a refuge to the persecuted and distressed of all other countries; and he gave us a lesson of moderation, which was the most seasonable gift he could bestow. Since that period, other nations have had their afflictive dispensations, while we have again been advancing in an uninterrupted course of prosperity. Is the season arrived when another lesson is wanted? Let us anticipate the necessity of its enforcement, by voluntarily taking into serious consideration those national defects, which may be supposed to lie within the scope of the reforming plans of Providence.

Extended dominion, overflowing wealth, peace at home, and respect abroad, naturally become the parents of overweening confidence, of pride, arrogance, ostentation, luxurious indulgence, and insatiable avidity. Before these haughty passions, the sacred claims of justice, the sober pleas of moderation, the counsels of wisdom, and the remonstrances of freedom, are put to an igno-

minious flight. Patriotism is turned into a spirit of domination; industry becomes grasping rapacity; and courage, daring violence. The excessive opulence of the few, stimulates the desires of the many. New wants continually arise, which demand new inventions for their supply. One part of society preys upon the other, by desperate and dishonest projects; and political corruption contaminates every wholesome principle in the state. Abuses are fostered, not only by those who immediately profit by them, but by the much more numerous train of greedy expectants. Salutary provisions of controul are converted into a system of mutual connivance. Institutions, the original purpose of which was to favour equality, are made the engines of more complete subjugation of the inferior to the superior classes. Principles are deserted and ridiculed; independence is sunk to an empty name; and all rush into servitude, for the sake of present advantages, blind to their lasting interests, careless for posterity.

Such, in general, are the moral evils consequent upon too full a tide of national prosperity. I mean not to bring home all the particulars to the present character of our country. I shall content myself with pointing out a few enormities, which, if suffered to continue, will render, in the eyes of God and of reasonable men, our meeting on this day a mere mockery of religion.

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We are a people *politically free*, and we justly boast of this freedom as our noblest distinction among the nations. We know our civil rights, and what it has cost to maintain them. Our ancestors, at a time when the genuine principles of liberty were yet new in the world, boldly asserted them against the arms of tyrants, and the arguments of bigots. Through scenes of contest and blood, through good report and ill report, they struggled to establish their birthrights against foreign and domestic foes, and they succeeded. What inconsistency, what degeneracy, must it then be, to be induced by mean jealousy, partial prejudices, and petty interests, to aid in forging for others, fetters which ourselves have broken ! Against attempts to disturb our own tranquillity, against usurpations on the properties of unoffending neighbours, we have a right to employ the power which God has given us ; but never let us be led to join with unprincipled despots, in controuling the operations of a sovereign people, when employed in settling their internal affairs according to their own ideas. Should such an interference prove successful, ought we to complain if the same unjust policy were practised against ourselves, by those to whom freedom, in any shape, is a galling spectacle ?

We are a people *personally free* — a thing of much more consequence to happiness than political

tical freedom. Private and domestic slavery is totally banished from our country; and the law protects the life and property of the lowest peasant, with as firm a hand as those of the highest noble. This is indeed a blessing! —but is it a blessing to us alone, and not equally to the rest of mankind? Has the poor African no share in this privilege of nature: and shall *we* be the instruments by which he is wronged of it? O shame! O guilt! O ingratitude! Britons make a traffic of slavery — tear innocent men by the basest of artifices from their native soil—from all they hold dear—carry them into irons to other Britons, who buy them like vile cattle, and wear out their wretched lives in the most corroding servitude! This foul crime, exposed, avowed, undefended, but still permitted, will sit heavy on the soul of Britain in the day of her adversity. Hide thy face, Queen of Isles, in burning blushes—wash out with repentant tears thy deep stains—mourn in sackcloth—mortify with real fastings—and dare not again to lift thy head towards the throne of Divine mercy, till thou hast ceased to be cruel and unjust!

We are a *commercial* people—the greatest probably that ever existed. We ought, therefore, to be perfectly apprized, that commerce was intended as a mutual benefit to the nations engaged in it, that it is a golden chain by which
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man is connected with man, though inhabiting regions the most remote from each other; that its spirit is that of peace, equity, and good faith; and totally adverse to hostile encroachments, and the usurpation of dominion by fraud or force. But have we been guided by these ideas? Is there no country which having received us as merchants, has cause to lament its want of foresight in giving itself foreign and imperious masters? Did the gentle native of Indostan dare to ask us, by what right we drain his country of its treasures, and involve it in all the horrors of war and famine whenever it suits the interests of our dark policy—what could we reply, but that nature has given us fiercer souls, and more vigorous faculties than his; that we are made animals of rapine, and he our timid prey? Alas! will this answer serve us when the Lord of heaven and earth shall ask us the question? Shall we chuse to have it retorted upon us when, in the progression of human affairs, some warlike and adventurous nation shall assume the same authority over us, then sunk into the effeminacy of luxurious indulgence? Shall we dare to plead the sacred laws of religion, honour, justice, and humanity, after having violated them all at our pleasure? This, this is one of our great national offences; but an offence, the present fruits of which

which, I fear, taste too sweet, to suffer us sincerely to repent of it, still less to resign it !

We are an *enlightened* people. All the stores of ancient and modern wisdom are laid open to us, and the experience of every age of the world is at hand for our direction. By means of these advantages we are enabled to ascertain the soundest principles of law, government, polity, morals, and of every art and science by which the advancement and happiness of mankind are promoted. But are there not among us those who love darkness better than light—who obstinately foster ancient errors in preference to modern truths—who vilify and defame the liberal promoters of public improvement, and throw every obstacle in the way of their further progress ? Were this done only through ignorance and blind prejudice, we might lament, but could scarcely blame ; and might acquiesce in the certainty that the light would at length overcome the darkness. But inasmuch as it is done by design, through the selfish views of those who profit by the prevalence of error and imperfection in public institutions, it is a national crime, and one of no mean rank.

But more especially, all interested opposition to the spread of religious truth, all debasement of the spirit of religion by allying it with state-policy, and making it subservient to party views,

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is highly criminal in a Christian and a Protestant country. The scriptures, to which we boast our free access, and from which alone we profess to derive our religious system, certainly have not taught us to model the rites and doctrines of Christianity by the occasions of civil government. When our Saviour, in the institution of that rite to which almost all his followers have attached notions of peculiar sanctity, explained its purport by the plain and solemn words, "This do in remembrance of me," he could never, but by the spirit of prophecy, foresee, that they should come in after ages to signify, "This do, that you may be qualified for a post in the army or revenue." When he and his apostles declared the simple principles of the faith they were sent to teach, and annexed *sincerity* as one of the most essential conditions for their right reception, they never could have a view of the numerous obscure and contradictory articles into which this faith was to be ramified; still less could they suppose, that an assent to them was to be forced upon persons previously to all examination, and was to be maintained even after doubts and discussions, by the temptation of pecuniary emolument. It is difficult to speak of these gross profanations in the terms they deserve, and yet with the appearance of moderation. That even by the ministers of the national religion, who all know,

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and many of whom openly lament, the mischiefs to which these shocking impositions give rise, they should, however, from worldly considerations be maintained with all the indecent heat of party, is a melancholy proof how little we are characterized by the genuine spirit of piety.

It is not difficult to trace these evils to their source. An opinion of the *utility* of religion, in contradistinction to its *truth* and *purity*—that its purpose is chiefly to awe the minds of the vulgar, and that therefore it is better to preserve ancient institutions, however faulty, than to subvert them by means of free enquiry—is the pernicious error which has scattered its tares among the good seed in so many Christian countries. Some late events seem to have given it additional vigour; and a new feature in our national character appears to display itself, the detestable spirit of hypocritical zeal. Persons, of whom it is no breach of candour to suppose, that in no one action of their whole lives have they been influenced by considerations of religious duty, now begin to assume the tone of overacted piety, and on all public occasions abound in professions of devout attachment to the faith of their ancestors. What this faith is, and upon what founded, they have never examined. To regulate their conduct by its precepts, is the farthest thing from their thoughts: their system of morals

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is already formed in a very different school: they are men of the world, and it would be weakness indeed to introduce the maxims of Christianity into the business or pleasures of the world. But as far as a few ceremonies, the observance of particular days, the occasional modelling of their features into a sanctimonious air, the giving credit to the worship of God by their presence—so far they are willing to go, out of respect to the *National Church*, from which, in return, they hope to receive support in all their claims of superiority. It is not for themselves that they want a religion, but for their servants and inferiors: for this purpose, one is as good as another, provided it be believed; and as they cannot trust to reason for enforcing the belief of any, they must seem to believe it themselves, and countenance the profession of it by their own example. Such is the religion of too many of the great. It *can* be no other, because it produces no other fruits. But hypocrisy, grafted upon habitual profligacy, is the extreme of mental depravation; and if that should become the prevalent vice of the times, there will indeed be reason to suppose, that the chastisement of Heaven is impending over our heads.

Under an awful impression of the result of our enquiries into the moral and religious state of our country, and a conviction of the necessity of powerful applications to effect its amendment,

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I confess I am not prepared to look up to the Almighty with a direct petition, that he would prosper us in all the undertakings which ignorance or presumption may have led us to plan.

Rather, O Sovereign Ruler of Nations! deign to remove from our eyes those mists of self-love and prejudice which prevent us from clearly discerning our real condition! Inspire us with that spirit of equity and moderation, which may render unnecessary those severer visitations of thy Providence, by which thou reformest an obstinately guilty land! We would wish not even to desire the splendours of external prosperity, at the expence of national virtue, or procured by usurpation on the rights of others, our brethren in the great family of mankind. We humbly trust, that the present awful scene of human affairs will terminate in the manner which thy wisdom has ordained, as most conducive to the best interests of thy creatures. But, O suffer us not to be more deeply plunged in crime! May our hands be preserved undefiled by innocent blood, and our hearts uncorrupted by malignant passions! Above all, may we not use religion as a cloak for unworthy designs, nor presume to make Thee a partner in iniquity. And if the present day have added any offences of this kind to our former account, O cancel and forgive them! *Amen.* 10 EE 58